

On Translating William Faulkner: A Personal Note

Hans H. Skei

Oslo, Norway

William Faulkner is one of the most widely translated of American writers. Interestingly, the first Faulkner translation anywhere was the Norwegian translation of *Soldiers' Pay* in 1932, translated by Hans Heiberg. It was followed by a translation of *Light in August* two years later. Then it all came to a halt, and no new translations appeared till about the time when Faulkner was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1950. In the 1950s we saw translations of a selection of fourteen short stories, *Sanctuary* and *The Unvanquished*, and in the 1960s *The Reivers*, *The Wild Palms*, and *The Sound and the Fury* appeared. Books of great importance in Faulkner's career, which are also among the most important works of prose in American fiction of all times: *Absalom, Absalom!*; *As I Lay Dying*; *Go Down, Moses*; and *The Hamlet* remained unavailable in Norwegian. In the 1990's some of this has been set right. Ole Pramli translated *As I Lay Dying*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *Go Down, Moses* in the first half of the decade, and a wider selection (altogether 27 stories) of Faulkner's short stories were brought out. I translated a few of my favorite stories for this collection, which I edited, including a new translation of "A Rose for Emily," which had been translated into Norwegian two or three times already. I had no intention whatsoever of becoming a translator, or to spend whatever time I could spare to try and do the impossible. Yet since 1996 I have translated four of Faulkner's novels plus his charming but insignificant children's book *The Wishing Tree*. Why did I do this? How did I do it? What are the problems, challenges, impossibilities of translating Faulkner? Can it at all be done, or should I rather have left it alone?

It all began in Columbia, South Carolina in the fall of 1995. I was struggling during office hours to write the first part of a study of *The Hamlet* (which remains unfinished), and in the afternoons and evenings when I got tired of reading or speculating on what I was writing, I began, slowly and indecisively, to attempt a translation of the opening pages of *The Hamlet*. The translation was completed at home and published in 1996. In 1998 my translation of *The Town* appeared, and in 2000 *The Mansion*. In 2001 my translation of *Intruder in the Dust* will be published. In the following I shall limit my comments to my long work with the translation of the Snopes trilogy, which, incidentally, has been made available on audio cassettes for a library for the blind.

The world of Frenchman's Bend in *The Hamlet* is an old-fashioned world, a world of farmers and farming, of horses and mules, and of wagons and buggies. At the center of this world lies the cross-roads store, Varner's store with its porch where news is transmitted and stories told. Whatever happens in the village seems to become real, take on significance only when it is told, when it is given narrative form, and at the same time—at least in Faulkner's text—it achieves almost mythical status. *The Hamlet* is in many ways the last of Faulkner's great novels, and when it comes to richness in storytelling, sheer indulgence in the pleasure of yarn-spinning, it surpasses everything the author ever did. The formal experiments of *The Sound and the Fury* and even the rural modernism of *As I Lay Dying* are very different from the narrative of *The Hamlet*. Yet Faulkner's prose in his descriptions of the people in Frenchman's Place, in particular Eula Varner and Ike Snopes, reaches from the plain and ordinary and rural to the most abstract, literary, mythic, and even modernistic. This may not pose serious problems for the translator, but to capture the changing tone and pitch and modulations of speech is a challenge. When Faulkner seems to abandon all control and lets his sentences run on and on in a lasting attempt to catch the fluidity of life, as in the serious and heart-breaking and totally meaningless pursuit by Ike of the cow in the lush summer-nights of Yoknapatawpha, a translator can only do his best to render words, phrases, sentences and hope that they are meaningful, that they signify, and be satisfied. I am convinced that in some instances Faulkner himself did not know what he was writing or where he was going, but the sum of such impossible lengthy descriptions may nevertheless give the impression he sought for and which ordinary language could not convey.

Such lengthy descriptive passages, fairly abstract and in rich metaphorical language, are the most difficult of all the impossibilities a translator encounters in *The Hamlet*. The first problems to be solved are, however, of a different nature. This is related to the world of Frenchman's Bend and its farmers. They use horses or mules, they plow their fields in the spring and grow cotton or corn. They drive wagons of many sorts, from buckboards to buggies. They buy coils of plowline from Varner's store. As we all know, the names and designations and the technical vocabulary for harness and equipment for horses and mules have disappeared from language. If I managed with some degree of success to get this right in my translation of *The Hamlet*, it can only be because I grew up on a dirt farm in Northern Norway in the 1950's which was before the mechanization of farms, even before the general advent of tractors. This was, however, helpful only to a certain extent. Growing potatoes and hay in Northern Norway in the 1950's is different from growing cotton in Mississippi at the beginning of the twentieth century. From planting to ginning and baling, cotton has its own peculiar vocabulary, for which dictionaries only offer meager help. So, simply knowing the words themselves was difficult. Calvin S. Brown's *A Glossary of Faulkner's South* offered help when local expressions, items, and events had to find a Norwegian equivalent. For brands of dogs, ways of stopping a wagon, rituals of hunting, and local folklore, Brown was useful and necessary simply to get on with the task.

A particular problem in *The Hamlet* was to find a style and a language that would set Ratliff's speech and the stories he told apart from the main narrator's language and tone. When Ratliff—smooth, bland, pleasant, easy, inscrutable, affable—engages in conversation with the people of Yoknapatawpha, he is not much different from them, and when he tells a story on the front porch of Varner's store, he uses fairly conventional story-telling techniques. Yet Faulkner obviously has tried to render his speech so that it appears to be oral, spoken, and *not* written. He very often does this by a spelling that brings the words closer to their pronunciation, which can be done in English where the difference is so clear. In Norwegian this cannot be done. When Ratliff says "Sho," he says "Sure" – and this is what I have to translate. In later books, e.g. in *The Town*, Charles Mallison comments a number of times on Ratliff's speech, since he feels that Ratliff's "has took" is stronger and more persuasive than "has taken"

would have been. How does one translate such play on language? In all such instances, one has to take greater liberty than I have otherwise taken, and simply try to create a parallel in Norwegian that may have an effect similar to the original text.

In the three novels of the Snopes trilogy one problem remained stable, and I struggled as much with it at the end of the translation of *The Mansion* as I did when I began my work some 1200 pages earlier. This is related to Faulkner's methods of characterization, whether he describes Flem, Ratliff, Ab, Mink or even Ilte, or when he seeks to vary his descriptions of atmosphere, climate, voice, fear, aspirations, and despair. Faulkner seems to have an endless supply of adjectives, adverbs, nouns, and even adds a few that are more or less of his own making. An early characterization of a face seldom has less than three adjectives in a row, to be varied and supplemented with others as the description continues. Here is an example from the first presentation of Ratliff in *The Hamlet*:

On successive days and two counties apart the splashed and battered buckboard and the strong mismatched team might be seen tethered in the nearest shade and Ratliff's bland affable ready face and his neat tieless blue shirt one of the squatting group at a cross-roads store, or—and still squatting and still doing the talking apparently though actually doing a good deal more listening than anybody believed until afterward—among the women surrounded by laden clothes lines and tubs and blackened wash pots beside springs and wells, or decorous in a splint chair on cabin galleries, pleasant, affable, courteous, anecdotal and impenetrable.

P i dager etter hverandre og med to fylkers avstand kunne man se det sterkt ubalanserte tospannet og den sølete og bulkete vogna fastbundet i nærmeste skygge og Ratliffs milde vennlige åpne ansikt og hans pene blåskjorte uten slips i en gruppe som satt p i huk ved en butikk i et veikryss, eller – fremdeles p i huk og fremdeles tilsynelatende den som snakket selv om han i virkeligheten lyttet mye mer enn noen trodde før etterpå – blant kvinene som var omgitt av nedlessete klessnorer og baljer og tilsmussete vaskebøtter ved kilder eller brønner, eller mer verdig i en kurvstol p i husverandaer, hyggelig, vennlig, høflig, anekdotisk og uutgrunnelig.

An interesting challenge in the first of the Snopes books was to try and capture the tone of stories so different as, say, the "Fool About a Horse" episode early in the book and the "Spotted Horses" narrative near the end of it. In between there is, of course, the nightmarish "The Hound," and the story of Eula, of Labove, of Ike and the cow. Through all of it, above or beyond or as an inevitable and integrated part of people's Lives, is the

story line of Flem's rise in the world and of bargains and deals which amount to a battle between Ratliff and Flem.

In *The Town* we move to a different world, the world of the town of Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha. We get to know Charles (Chick) Mallison and his uncle, Gavin Stevens, and we meet Flem and Eula in a new setting. We visit the power plant, wealthy people buy cars, and a war is fought in Europe. The challenges for the translator change, but only slightly, because Faulkner's language is as complex, complicated, varied, and rich as before. Yet this is a much weaker book, less literary, less "over-written," and hence in many ways an easier task for the translator. The main task in this novel is to find a language for each of the narrators: Chick Mallison, Gavin Stevens, and V.K. Ratliff. Ratliff is the least important of these three narrators, but he also figures prominently—and is quoted in direct speech—in the sections narrated by one of the two others. Further complications stem from the fact that Chick tells part of a story that has been told to him by a cousin, since he was not even born when this happened! His language, as well as his understanding, changes through the narrative in *The Town*, even if this may not be very significant.

Faulkner's deliberate changes of narrative perspective should not mislead the translator to become too preoccupied with the differences between the narrators, the stories they tell, and the language they use. Each episode, no matter who narrates, is part of the larger pattern and the greater story. Time and again we return to stories that have been told before; e.g. when we watch Mink Snopes in the courtroom or when Ratliff again and again creates his versions of what happened between Eula and Hoake McCarron on the night when Eula became pregnant.

In *The Mansion* the number of narrators is higher than in the two preceding novels, and here it becomes vitally important to capture the tone, rhythm and tenor at least of the most important narrators, who are also protagonists in the story they tell: Mink Snopes and Gavin Stevens. The other narrators—Montgomery Ward, Ratliff, Charles Mallison—are less important in this respect. Perhaps the greatest experience of translating the three Snopes volumes was the necessity to see in Mink Snopes a poor, deplorable, murderous, suffering, and believable human being, and the greatest pleasure was a feeling of having succeeded, if indeed such a word can be used, in having created different narratives in the Gavin Stevens parts and the Mink Snopes parts.

What else? All I remember now is the slow, never-ending work, a page at a time, perhaps as many as five in a day, translated at odd hours when all other duties were taken care of. And I remember the strong temptation to improve on Faulkner, who can be repetitive, insistent, almost to become boring. When a character says something, Faulkner never varies the verb: it is "says" or "said." He can use "answered" three or four times in a row, and even if it may be typical and help in the characterization, Ratliff does not have to say "Sho now" all the time! I resisted this temptation, of course. But this might lead to another danger: too much respect for Faulkner's text, and a translation too close to it, which could mean an inflexible and unnatural Norwegian text. There is no doubt that I have tried to limit my own freedom, and remain close to Faulkner's text. I may have made the wrong choice, but it was the only one available to me, and based on more than thirty years of reading and studying Faulkner's books.